

This record is a partial extract of the original cable. The full text of the original cable is not available.

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 MANAMA 001619

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

STATE FOR NEA/ARPI, INR

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [PINR](#) [BA](#)

SUBJECT: SURVEY OF PARLIAMENTARY BLOCS

Sensitive but unclassified (deliberative process); please protect accordingly. Not for Internet distribution.

Summary and Introduction

1. (SBU) The Council of Representatives (COR - lower house of parliament) October 9 opened for its third parliamentary session since the adoption of the 2002 constitution. In the absence of political parties, which are still illegal, the forty members have formed six blocs based upon common interests or common religious views. These are Al Minbar; Al Asala; Al Islamiya; National Democrats; Independents; and the newly established Economic Elite. The blocs are not completely rigid and leaders allow the members to offer or gain support from other blocs on particular issues. The blocs will occasionally form alliances with one another, but none are permanent. They are pursuing legislation to further their political objectives but have made the most headlines through their actions on religious and moral issues. In fact, due to ongoing disputes between the parliament, government, and opposition political societies outside the system regarding constitutional processes for drafting, submitting, and passing legislation, very few bills have been enacted during the previous two legislative sessions. Though Bahrain's Shia community represents some two-thirds of the citizenry, they are underrepresented in the COR because of the decision by Al Wifaq, the most popular Shia political society, to boycott the 2002 parliamentary elections. End Summary and Introduction.

Al Minbar: Relatively Moderate Sunni Islamists

2. (SBU) Al Minbar is Bahrain's Muslim Brotherhood and in the Bahraini context the group has developed into a relatively moderate, constructive Sunni organization. It and Al Asala, the Sunni Salafi (more conservative) political bloc in parliament, often cooperate, particularly on issues involving religious affairs and morals. Al Minbar, with seven members, and Al Asala, with five members, comprise 12 of the 40 deputies in the COR, or 30 percent, and they have emerged as the most potent political force in parliament. Al Minbar's primary legislative focus has been on a personal status law that is in line with Islamic Sharia but is acceptable to all Bahraini citizens, Sunni and Shia alike. Al Minbar's chairman, physician Salah Ali, is a prominent advocate for the rights of women and children. Al Minbar has drafted a bill on child education and proposed the establishment of family counseling centers. Because of the size and internal discipline of the Al Minbar voting bloc, it often plays the role of deal maker/breaker in COR decisions.

3. (SBU) Chairman Ali's moderate image is in marked contrast with Spokesman Shaikh Mohammed Khalid Ibraheem's persona. Ibraheem publicly expresses strongly anti-American views and has refused to meet with American officials. He has ties with and vocally supports the six Sunni terror suspects and has organized campaigns calling for the release of the Bahraini detainees at Guantanamo. He headed protests against satellite television channel MBC's filming the show "Big Brother" in Bahrain in February, which led to the Minister of Information's decision to close down the production.

Al Asala: Salafis in the Modern Age

4. (SBU) The five members of the COR in the Al Asala bloc are from the Sunni Salafi offshoot of Islam and adhere to a strict literal interpretation of Koranic and Hadith scriptures. Al Asala political bloc is an affiliate of Al Tarbiya Al Islamiya (Islamic Education) Charity Society, from which it receives funding. In general, Al Asala does not take a confrontational stance towards the GOB. Al Asala President Shaikh Adel Al Moawda told PolFSN that his bloc has three main goals: to increase the standard of living; support institutions that will improve political, social and economic stability; and enhance financial and administrative

oversight. Al Asala has proposed draft legislation to establish unemployment insurance, criminalize trafficking in persons, and penalize the press for violating individuals' privacy.

15. (SBU) Al Asala's president Al Moawda is poised, western educated, speaks excellent English and is willing to discuss any issue with EmbOfs. He spoke out publicly against Lebanese singer Nancy Ajram holding a concert in Bahrain in late 2003, but told us he was chagrined that his outspokenness led to protests and eventually the cancellation of the concert. Although Al Asala takes a conservative Islamic stance, Al Moawda has publicly denounced the Taliban and Al Qaida, and is in favor of allowing women to drive while wearing the veil, a recent development in Bahrain. An emerging member of the bloc whose shyness has kept him out of the public eye is attorney Hamad Al Mohammadi, a legal technocrat who is focused on amending the COR's bylaws.

Al Islamiya: Shia, but Not Representative

16. (SBU) An affiliate of the Shia Al Rabita Society, Al Islamiya is the sole Shia-only bloc in the COR. Its seven members' main goals are to uphold the teaching of Islamic Sharia and to ensure that legislation does not conflict with cultural mores and Sharia principles. The bloc is comparatively large in size but diminutive in power, and Al Islamiya has been dubbed the "sleeping bloc." Though two-thirds of the citizens of Bahrain are Shia, they are underrepresented in parliament because of the boycott of the 2002 elections led by the largest Shia political society, Al Wifaq. Al Islamiya drafted bills to mandate teaching the principles of the major sects of Islam in schools and to establish a drug rehabilitation center. It has been a proponent of combating unemployment, offering housing for the poor, providing care for the elderly, and empowerment of women and children.

17. (SBU) Chairman Ali Al Samaheji laments that his bloc has little public support. He opposes Al Wifaq's participation in the 2006 parliamentary elections, understanding (correctly) that neither he nor his colleagues in Al Islamiya have much chance of winning races against Al Wifaq candidates.

The Pro-Government Independents

18. (SBU) Despite its name, the eight-member Independent bloc is a pro-government Sunni grouping. Chairman Abdul Aziz Al Mousa and Spokesman Abdulla Al Dosari told us that the bloc's main goals are to uphold the teachings of the National Action Charter (King Hamad's social contract for democratic reform), develop public infrastructure, and expand subsidies for housing, water, electricity and health care. The Independent bloc uniformly supports GOB positions. Its two major draft bills concern instituting an airport tax exemption for Bahrainis and the controversial political societies law, which seeks to regulate the registration and activities of political societies (in the absence of legal political parties). Other parliamentary blocs and various sectors of society have condemned the draft for its restrictions and harsh punishments for violations.

Truly Democratic

19. (SBU) The National Democratic bloc has three members who always reach a unanimous consensus before moving forward on any initiative. For the past two years it has been the only bloc with both Sunni and Shia members, until the recent formation of the Economic Elite bloc. The National Democratic bloc is the most liberal, active and outspoken parliamentary group. The members advocate transparency, accountability, and continued political and economic reform. It has proposed a number of draft bills to facilitate foreign direct investment. It is currently working to establish consumer protection regulations and to form a High Council for Planning.

New Guys on the Block

110. (SBU) Parliament's newest group is the Economic Elite bloc. Like the Democratic bloc, its members are both Sunni and Shia. Bloc member attorney Fareed Ghazi told EmbOfs that the members formed the bloc to ensure the country's economic interests are taken into account, especially following a number of COR proposals and actions such as the Nancy Ajram and "Big Brother" incidents that angered the business community and threatened Bahrain's traditional

atmosphere and reputation for openness and tolerance. Chairman Jassim Hassan Abdul A'al said that the bloc will work to protect Bahrain's investment climate, with a focus on making foreign investors comfortable in the country, and counteract the Islamist tendencies of many COR members. Member Issa Abu Al Fateh told EmbOfs that he would consider an alliance only with the National Democratic bloc, though he would support other blocs' proposals when appropriate.

The Unassociated Members

11. (SBU) The six unassociated members are truly independent and do not have ties with each other or with any of the blocs. COR Chairman Khalifa Al Dhahrani is an unassociated member.

Parliamentary Bloc Rosters

12. (SBU) Al Minbar Bloc members: Dr. Salah Ali Mohammed, Dr. Shaikh Abdul Latif Ahmed Al Shaikh, Dr. Ali Ahmed Abdulla, Dr. Saadi Mohammed Abdulla, Abdul Aziz Jalal Al Meer, Mohammed Khalid, Hassan Eid Bu Khamas

Al Asala Bloc members: (COR Second Deputy Chairman) Shaikh Adel Abdul Rahman Al Moawda, Hamad Al Mohanadi, Ali Mohammed Muttar, Dr. Issa Jassim Al Mutawa, Ghanim Fadhel Al Boainain

Al Islamiya Bloc members: Ali Al Samaheji, Shaikh Abdulla Al A'ali, Ahmed Hussain Abbas, Abbas Hassan Salman, Issa Hassan bin Rajab, Mohammed Hussain Al Khayat, Mohammed Al Abbas

Independent Bloc members: Abdul Aziz Abdulla Al Mousa, Ahmed Ibraheem Behzad, Ahmed Abdulla Haji, Sami Al Buhairi, Abdulla Khalaf Al Dosari, Mohammed Faihan Al Dosari, Mohammed Ibraheem Al Kaabi, Yousif Hussain Al Hermi

Democratic Bloc members: (COR First Deputy Chairman) Abdulhadi Marhoon, Abdulnabi Salman, Yousif Zainalabedeem Zainal

Economic Elite Bloc members: Jassim Hassan Abdul A'al, Fareed Ghazi Rafee', Othman Mohammed Sharif, Issa Ahmed Abu Al Fateh

Unassociated Members: COR Chairman Khalifa bin Ahmed Al Dhahrani, Dr. Ibraheem Al Abdulla, Jassim Al Saeedi, Jihad Bu Kamal, Sameer Al Shuwaikh, Jassim Al Mowali
MONROE